

He picked the big pieces up by hand and threw them in the trash can, but for the little stuff — the tiny slivers and diamonds — he used the vacuum suction of the lawn mower with its attached grass bag. Little Roy followed along behind his father, pushing his own mower — a red plastic version of the old man's machine that his mother had bought for him down at the K-Mart.

BIRD'S EGG BLUE

Ellis got drunk while watching boxing on HBO. After the fight was over (a one-round knockout by a brute named Tyson), he — feeling combative after the punch-out and reckless with the booze — accused his wife of having an affair.

"The kid's (Roy's) eyes, Ruth," he slurred from his slouch on the sofa, "Bird's egg blue. Now les' see, mine are brown, yours are brown; whadaya figure the odds are a tha' happenin'?"

"Oh for Christ's sake," said Ruth (she'd been through this before). "It was the paperboy, O.K.?"

Ellis dragged the boy's face up from his blurry memory: there he was, standing on the porch, purple acne scabs on his face, big Adam's apple, peach fuzz mustache — eyes the color of a clear summer sky....

The doorbell rang. Ruth answered it then lumbered back into the house for the checkbook.

"Who's it?" said Ellis.

"Paperboy," said Ruth. "Collecting."

Ellis pushed himself up and staggered across the rug and smashed through the front door. The paperboy leaned away from the roundhouse right, and Ellis' momentum carried him off the porch to land face down on the sidewalk, where he lay out cold and bleeding from the mouth, just like the guy who'd gone up against Tyson.

THE DAWN PATROL

There was only one person awake in the Leahy house before dawn, and that was two-year-old Roy, so Sandra the three-hundred-pound hog that Roy's mother Ruth bought as a piglet in the mistaken belief that the cute little porker was one of those tiny pot-bellied pigs, nudged the sleepy-eyed,

pajama-clad little fellow toward the front door with her snout. It was trash day, and she wanted out. Roy took her hint and pushed the front door open for her, and he grabbed her around the neck as she passed him and swung his leg up over her back and mounted her. He was going for a ride.

The trash cans weren't out in front of the Leahy house. Ellis, the lord of the manor, was a procrastinator. The plastic barrels usually stayed inside the garage until the last minute, when Lord Ellis was awakened by the roar of the trash truck as it rumbled down the street. In a wrinkled bathrobe and Ruth's bedroom slippers, his hair (what was left of it) tousled, his face puffy, his eyes bloodshot, Ellis Leahy would drag the cans from the garage to the sidewalk, usually beating Arturo and his voracious steel monster to the curb by seconds, much to Arturo's amusement.

But if the pickin's were slim in front of the Leahy house, the curb at the Johnson place, right next door, was another story: three overflowing plastic barrels and a dozen shiny green garbage bags, all of them fragrant, ripe with possibility. Sandra trotted toward the mother lode. Little Roy jounced and giggled on top of her. Off in the distance — two, perhaps three blocks away — a trash truck growled. And Sandra dug in, driving her snout through one of the green bags to immediate pay dirt: a wedge of four contiguous slices of rubberized De Nio's pizza.

Little Roy slid down and tugged one of the slices off the wedge. Sandra squealed and shook her head and pulled her chunk of the pie away and spun around and started eating. Next door, Ellis dragged his can to the curb then stopped to watch his son and his wife's pig in action. "I wonder," he thought, "if there are truffles around here. I gotta get that damned pig out there after some truffles, make her start earning her damned keep."

Roy finished his one slice; Sandra finished her three. Then the two foragers scowled at each other, and then each of them picked a separate trash bag to attack as Arturo's trash truck rounded the corner.

BUNGEE BLUES

It is illegal to bungee jump from the bridges and railroad trestles in San Luis County, so they do it from the baskets of hot-air balloons over the wide, gently sloping creek valley behind the beach city of Loma Alta. Brightly colored canopies rise with the sun to float over the spring-green wild grasses, the grids of the strawberry fields, the